

# Chinese Parental-Adolescent Relationship: Between Control and Autonomy

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## ABSTRACT

Chinese parent-children interactions have long been considered as emphasizing conformity while discouraging adolescents' autonomy [1]. However, there is a lack of research on the subjective views of Chinese teenagers in the major cities of China, especially after 2000. Leveraging the author's identity as a peer to the interlocutors, the study draws on interviews of 20 high school students to demonstrate that among current Chinese high school students, various forms of parental control are perceived, including explicit control, implicit control, and perceptions of the absence of control. Chinese adolescents develop their own creative strategies to resolve family conflicts as well. The strategies vary from passive to active ones, consisting of no response, performance, trust dynamics outside family, and negotiation. The study reveals intergenerational value convergence as well as differences, leading to more dynamic parent-children interactional patterns that go beyond children's conformity under authoritative parenting.

**Keywords:** *Parental-adolescent relationship, autonomy, Chinese teenagers, parental control, family conflicts*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

According to the conventional understanding of the Chinese parental-adolescents relationship, Chinese parents adopt punishment-oriented education and emphasize conformity [2]. Chinese adolescents are expected to be obedient and respectful [3]. More recent literature have started to question these assumptions by suggesting that modern Chinese parents listen more to their children and demonstrate more respect in family interactions than previous literature have believed [4]. A co-existence of encouragement and control from parents in Chinese households is more common than before. Under this new circumstance, Chinese teens desire more freedom and autonomy when making decisions as well [5]. This research explores how adolescents perceive this new hybrid parenting culture and how they navigate it.

While the recent literature has presented a more complex picture of the core family's intergenerational relations, they overlooked the varied views from the adolescents' point. Researchers generally interview or collect data from adults as parents and ignore the subjective evaluations of Chinese adolescents. The thoughts behind the scene may not be even accessible to the interviewer, who is an adult. The age difference between interviewers and adolescents interviewees might

result in adolescents' reluctance to be open and share their sincere thoughts and information. Therefore, researchers overlook the dynamics between the parents' ways of control vis-à-vis the children's strategies of reaction, since parents or adult interviewers are less likely to sense some subtle ways of control.

The overall goal of this research is to pursue a more comprehensive understanding of contemporaneous Chinese family interactions. Previous literature has limited geographic focus, mainly in Hong Kong, which is not representative of mainland China [5, 6]. The lack of in-depth investigations about complex actual conditions in mainland China might result in misunderstandings towards Chinese mainstream cultures and family interactions.

This paper draws on interviews with Beijing high school students conducted by the author, who is a peer high school student. This positionality shines a rare light on the struggles and seeks for autonomy and agency of the children in facing complex parenting culture.

Specifically, the author argues that in contemporary Chinese households, adolescents perceive diverse types of parental control. To resolve conflicts because of parental control and disagreements, they employ strategies varying in their activeness. This result finds

disrupts the stereotypical and homogenized understanding of Chinese parental-adolescent interaction patterns.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. Cultural context of parental-adolescent interactions

Adolescence has been deemed as a pivotal period for transformation and socialization. The adolescents receive information from various sources, including family, peers, school, community, and media. Because of the realms/domains of knowledge absorbed, adolescents regularly undergo transformations described by “storm and stress” [7]. Entering adolescence, children appear to become increasingly unsatisfied with parental authority, especially regarding their personal habits and activities [8, 9]. Therefore, it is evidenced that parent-adolescent conflicts are more frequent during adolescence compared with childhood [10]. Research has shown that such conflicts are normal if in moderate ways. Subsequently, it contributes to “adaptive change within parent-adolescent relationships” [11]. The conflicts conciliate the relationship between mutual “filial piety” and the functioning within families as well [10].

However, these parent-adolescent conflicts appear in different shapes under various social and cultural systems [12]. Compared with individualistic cultures, the child-rearing in collectivistic or socio-centric cultures apparently displays a distinctive picture. Under collectivistic contexts, more characteristics of compliance-oriented style are exhibited within families [13]. Parents are inclined to emphasize familial duty and obligations verbally and behaviorally [14].

In China’s specific context, with representative collectivistic culture, family interactions were conventionally considered to stress parental control. Due to the influence of Confucianism, the Chinese family is understood as a whole unit, in which family members should entertain interdependence instead of independence [15-17]. In Chinese child-rearing, parents and children possess significant reciprocal expectations. Parents are commonly presumed to be trustworthy and enlightening mentors, teaching children a sufficient amount of cultural norms, basic values, and plausible experiences, whereas they anticipate children to be compliant and deferential [3]. Uniqueness is rarely mentioned in family contexts; family and collectivistic demands are put above individual needs [6]. If ever, when children express their personal needs incompatible with family requirements (and those of larger units), they will be educated about societal duty, authority, and adherence to society-determined good conduct [17]. In this case, parental behaviors differ from those of Western cultures as well. Compared with North American parents, Chinese parents are more inclined to employ discipline

oriented by punishment and strategies centered on powerful coercion [2]. Meanwhile, Chinese teenagers are not believed to hold considerable autonomy by the mainstream society [19].

### 2.2. Micro-level interactions

With recognizable levels of conflicts within their families, Chinese teenagers manifest less pursuit of autonomy: youths from Hong Kong indicated expectations for personal autonomy later than their foreign peers and depicted their families as less “accepting-engaged” [1, 6, 20]. They de-emphasized self-reliance and personal accomplishment but stressed more on cultural beliefs and socialized outcomes. Research has shown that these denotations correlated with adolescents’ recognitions of monitoring, family demands, and oppressive parenting styles [6, 21].

However, the long-held arguments mentioned have been challenged in recent years. China’s economy has changed from a command economy planned by the central government toward a market-oriented one [5, 22]. In urban areas, the environment has become increasingly competitive: as a result, traditionally admirable characteristics, including shy-inhibited behaviors, are no longer compatible. Society stresses more on confidence and self-direction instead. The requirements of adjusting to the environment renew to emphasize leadership and investigations. For empirical evidence, Lin and Fu [23] found that Chinese parents rated higher on controlling actions and result-oriented parenting, but also on behaviors encouraging the pursuit of independence. The finding is contrary to the conventional view that Chinese households emphasize conformity and authority. These findings may have suggested that adolescents from different cultural and country backgrounds display similar trajectories of autonomy pursuit and development.

Instead of arguing the Chinese parenting style is majorly contrary to other individualistic cultures, some literature proposes that encouragement of independence and authoritarian parenting style coexist in Chinese households. In general, Chinese parents exhibit both control and cohesion to Chinese adolescents [24, 25]. They stress conformity and the effectiveness of punishments but also encourage intimacy and responsiveness, the typical traits of authoritative style in parenting [26, 27, 28].

How do adolescents cope with the contradictory parenting expectations that ask for both independence and docility? Instead, even adolescents entertain varied beliefs about the right of individual autonomy and parental control, as the study shows they self-report similar levels of agency and disputes in their households [29, 30]. Building on the recent development of the changing parenting dynamics in the Chinese families, this study shows specifically how adolescents perceive

parents' forms of control, how they react to this change of parenting culture, how they preserve autonomy, and what strategies they deploy. Despite the recent literature's challenge to the conventional belief of Chinese family culture, there is a dearth of study on exactly what has gone through the teenagers' mind. We know little about the mechanisms through which adolescents reconcile these contradictory expectations from the parents. From the positionality of a peer to the adolescent interviewees, this paper contributes to examining the subjective world of these adolescents. Their growing experience and strategies can also provide a glimpse into the future adulthood that struggles with the larger society filled with market competitiveness alongside authoritarianism.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

To investigate adolescents' perceptions of different forms of parental controls in Chinese households and what strategies they utilize to gain autonomy, the researcher conducted interviews with 20 Chinese high-school adolescents, 11 females and 9 males. The interviewee's ages span from 16 to 18. The age range is appropriate for this study because it enables adolescents to have relatively mature minds necessary for retrospective thinking and clear accounts of family interactions. The researcher chose adolescents rather than their parents to interview to collect firsthand data about children's perceptions and their psychological process during inner-family interactions.

Previous literature researching under the context of China majorly chose subjects from Hong Kong. However, operated under the "one country, two systems" principle, and with a history as a British colony, the cultural background of Hong Kong differs largely from that of mainland China. Therefore, the author initially recruited interviewees from the High School Affiliated to Renmin University of China, one of the best high schools in Beijing, the capital of China. Subsequently, the interviewees recommended students from other high schools, and the researcher reached them through snowballing. Note that a sample deviation might exist in the study since interviewees were gotten in touch via social networks. The subjects are majorly from middle class or upper-middle class, with parents working in professional fields. Therefore the study is a single case study. It does not explore the potential differences in the social hierarchy. However, the data collected exhibit various forms of parental control and strategies for adolescents' autonomy. Therefore, the data gathered is rich enough to display a complicated picture of family situations in mainland China.

The interviews started with questions regarding information to familiarize themselves with the interviewees. Following that, the researcher asked about the subjects' perceptions of their parents' expectations to

collect information about types of parental control. Later on, the subjects interviewees/interlocutors were asked to describe family interactions, including frequency and common causes of conflicts. Common reasons of conflicts were mentioned by the researcher, including parental control, objectional expectations and choices of majors. The subjects were required to provide detailed personal accounts and descriptions to establish a comprehensive picture of family interactions. Finally, the interviewees were asked about how the conflicts were resolved and how they maintained autonomy.

Due to the context of a global pandemic, all the interviews were conducted via Zoom, an online platform for immediate communications. The interviews were recorded by Zoom's internal function and then transcribed. Doing interviews online enables that time available for interviewers, and interviewees become more flexible. Because of privacy concerns, all interviewees were informed about the recording before the interviews started. The interviews were originally in Chinese and translated into English.

The study is unique because interviews were conducted by the author as an interviewer who is at the same age with the interviewees. Instead of an authoritative top-down figure, the interviewer is more approachable. The interviewees are more inclined to share their genuine thoughts, especially regarding sensitive topics like household conflicts. When faced with adult interviewers, they might become reluctant to share their authentic views of their parents. Therefore, the peer interviewer guarantees that the study results are more accurate and reflective.

### **4. ADOLESCENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF PARENTAL CONTROL**

Among the interviews conducted, three major types of parental control perceptions are mentioned: perceptions of absence of control, explicit control, and implicit control.

#### ***4.1. Perceptions of absence of control***

During the interviews, some interviewees expressed that in their family interactions, they perceive no parental control and regard their family atmosphere as harmonious. Though, it is noted that such perceptions do not necessitate the inexistence of parental control in these households. Instead, the results indicate that adolescents perceive no such stress or commands subjectively, potentially impacted by the definition of "control" and cultural contexts.

Two major factors result in the absence of control perceived. The high school students expressed that they feel respected among their parents and are conferred autonomy, illustrated significantly in major choices,

expectations of test results, and daily expressions. Li, a 17-year-old male student, says that when choosing his major, his parents “respect [his] own preference,” “give [him] the right to choose and ask [him] in what aspects [he’s] interested.” Moreover, as for parental expectancy for adolescents’ grades, Yeh, a senior student preparing for National College Entrance Examination, mentions: “Before important exams, my parents don’t interfere with my review. When the exams are done, my mom would express that the results aren’t crucial. What really matters is whether I do my best.”

Coincidentally, Sun, applying for U.S. universities at a Chinese international high school, shared with the interviewer: “When my rankings changed a lot during junior high, I was allowed to take my time to adjust myself. In senior high, my mother would check whether I forgot to hand in a paper sometimes. For other standardized tests, they are satisfied whenever I try my best.”

These accounts form sharp contrasts with conventional beliefs held towards Chinese parents [3]. Similarly, contrary to popular arguments that Chinese parents appear as authoritarian, Sun describes her family atmosphere by stating that “we respect each other and none of us has any privilege.”

In some situations, a lack of perceived control from adolescents comes from the common grounds between them and their parents. Guo, a high school senior planning to major in economics, described an example of such agreements: “When I fail an exam, they would punish me. I think that’s fair because I need to be responsible for my scores. For example, if I get a B on my transcript, I might not be able to go to my dream school. So I must do something to get an A instead... I respect my parents’ opinions. For instance, my mother went to College Entrance Examination on wheelchair but still got good results. I think she’s admirable and kind of my role model.”

The above narratives show an emerging trend among adolescents who perceive family relations as respectful and harmonious. The sense of autonomy is in direct contradiction with the traditional perception, but it does not convey the full picture. Below are two types of perceived parental control, explicit and implicit, that impose stress and discomforts on adolescents.

#### ***4.2. Explicit control***

Despite the harmonious atmosphere identified in some households, perceived explicit control is still prevalent inside the family. Adolescents interviewed expressed their dissatisfaction towards explicit control from parents. Such stress imposed was reported as demanding and frustrating. Explicit control here is defined as verbal pressure forced by parents to make adolescents achieve objectives parents set. Parents

exercise explicit control through different methods, including repeated expectations spoken, results forced to be realized, and sometimes even some intense or physically violent interactions.

It is demonstrated that even though some parents perceive their expectations as beneficial and useful without forceful power, adolescents still recognize those as demanding and exhausting. Specifically, result-oriented expectations are frequently mentioned as unacceptable and irritating. Li, a high school senior interested in badminton, stated:

“For some reason, I didn’t practice badminton frequently last semester, so in a competition, I lost. The result was not satisfying, so my father always asks me to practice more. He also hopes that I could make it to become an athlete above the 2nd level of national standard this summer.”

Correspondingly, Gu, a 17-year-old female, recounted her mother’s over-optimism regarding standardized tests: “My mom expects me to get over 1,550 in my SAT. After reading some articles from official accounts, she would repeat that. But she mentions that for multiple times and I’m used to that. The only thing is that such words are so annoying.”

Meanwhile, commensurate with earlier literature, parents are occasionally result-oriented and emphasize students’ accomplishments. They pay little attention to what problems lie in students’ trajectories and only focus on consequences. By way of illustration, Guo talked in a depressed tone (latter contacted and confirmed about his attitudes) when speaking: “When I don’t behave well, they would be angry and question why I can’t achieve as well as they did.”

What is more, several students referred to their parents’ brutal way of treating them when the adolescents failed to realize their expectations. Shen, a male student who grew up in Beijing, spoke briefly of how his parents hit him regularly when he was in elementary school. Wang, a 17-year-old schoolboy, applying to both U.S. and Canadian colleges, remarked: “When I fail an exam, my parents tear my paper. When I fail to solve problems on a book, they tear my book.”

The explicit control introduced is consistent with the arguments raised in some debatable literature: Chinese parents might appear authoritarian under certain circumstances more manifestly than their foreign counterparts [2]. Adolescents regard their parents’ repeated words of expectations, mostly the result-oriented ones, as a method to manipulate them. What displeases them most is parents’ sole emphasis on their grades, test results, awards won, and accomplishments. They aspire, instead, for parental cautions recognition of their hard work and diligent attempts.

The physically violent interactions among families are worth noting. Some adolescents, surprisingly, consider the intensive parental expression received as appropriate and efficient, illustrated by Shen's comments: "I think it's fair because such education forces me to correct my mistakes. Certainly, there are some better methods, but they did a direct and effective job."

The explicit control is expressed by parents directly and perceived by adolescents as undeniable control and stress imposed. However, among Chinese families, adolescents sense control from their families even if parents do not indicate those straightforwardly.

### **4.3. Implicit control**

Implicit control differs from explicit control because adolescents realize that their parents do not mean to impose control, but parental behaviors or expressions achieve the same effects with explicit control. Students sense their autonomy threatened and extra pressure imposed. Such control is often based on comparisons peer comparisons and parental over-expectations.

Horizontal comparison is widespread among Chinese households. The interviewees reflected that comparing adolescents to their peers is a habitual behavior among parents that they may not even realize some effective of psychological control is underway. Wang, a 16-year-old male student, even takes such comparison for granted: "My parents always compare my scores with my classmates, and it seems normal to me. They often question why I can't do as well as others."

Parents compare their children's achievements with their peers' to inspire their fighting will. Others who think such comparisons are abnormal might find them disturbing. Wen, a high school senior majoring in economics, recounted: "My parents always say their universities are much better than others' parents, and question why their kids do better than me. So I always feel I'm disappointing them and it bothers me too much. What is the point of such comparisons?" The account demonstrates that horizontal comparisons create psychological effects on adolescents. They perceive the juxtaposition with connotations that failing to do as well as others are disappointing, even though their parents do not indicate that directly.

Besides, Chinese parents also employ vertical comparison in their educations by comparing their own accomplishments with their children. Zhang, an adolescent who described her family with a relatively harmonious and acceptable atmosphere, narrated: "My mom always says she did great in mathematics at high school and questions why I can't. I think such words are unfair because we are different and this is normal."

It is remarkable, nevertheless, that adolescents recognizing such implicit control react in different ways. Zhang, obviously, questions such arguments by refuting the correlations between parents' achievements with hers. Others, Wen as an example, question parents' claims naturally but regard their disabilities to realize their parents' expectations as their own faults.

Parental over expectations is upsetting to children as well. Adolescents acknowledge that parents mention such prospects because of optimism and willingness to encourage students to progress; nonetheless, the results aspired by parents are hard to achieve, and therefore adolescents feel discomforts. Both Yu and Liu gave such accounts: "My father always indicates, while having meals, that most of my classmates may be able to get 1600 in SAT, so scoring 1550 is easy for me. It makes me so stressful cause it isn't the fact." (Yu) "Recently, my mother suddenly told me that she expects me to get into an Ivy university, especially during early decision. It makes me confused because I never thought about it. I don't know what level I'm on, but I'm sure I couldn't get into an Ivy school. It makes me more stressful. I'm not a confident person, so I'm not sure whether I can meet her expectation." (Liu)

Additionally, parents might indicate their expectations after the results are unchangeable to avoid extra stress for their children and inform them about their genuine thoughts. Their tactics could go backfire since adolescents might be trapped in guilty that they should have devoted more efforts, illustrated by Riley's commentaries: "I attended biology competition this year. I want to major in biology during my applications, so my parents regard the competition as crucial and expect me to earn an award. Before the final round, they intend to comfort me more. After the exam, they would tell me that actually they expect me to earn an award."

The implicit control indicates an additional value of interviewing adolescents upon this topic. Parents' perceptions of control or stress imposed might differ from adolescents' views. Therefore, previous literature interviewing parents about their behaviors could generate a downward bias towards measuring actual effects on adolescents.

Parental control revealed in these narratives from the adolescents' perspective cannot be homogenized as authoritarian. If anything, we see more and more common grounds and respect between parents and adolescents. However, these congenial relationships coexist with both explicit and implicit types of control that still impact adolescents' autonomy.

## **5. ADOLESCENTS' STRATEGIES TO RESOLVE CONFLICTS**

Parental control generally results in psychological detachment. The negative emotions generated through

conflicts could result in a spectrum of adolescents' reactions, from the willingness of reconciliation to long-term feelings of alienation.

Such detachment can be temporal or long-term. Zhang, a 17-year-old female student studying in the High School Affiliated to Renmin University of China, narrated about the common scene in her households' quarrels: "When it reaches a peak, I would tell them to go away and we no longer talk. Then when there's some important things like having meals, we will chat again." Both parents and adolescents calm down during the period, and the conflicts can be resolved naturally, with nobody mentioning them again.

Nonetheless, some conflicts might lead to long-term remoteness and distance between family members. Adolescents, in turn, employ diversified strategies to settle the aftermaths of the conflicts. These strategies vary in adolescents' attitudes from actively solving the problems to passively ignoring the conflicts. The following sections introduce these strategies based on a logical order from the most active ones to the most passive ones.

### **5.1. Negotiation**

When parental control is perceived, Chinese adolescents might negotiate with their parents voluntarily. Wang described how he negotiated with his parents about college applications: "Once my mother envisioned I could make it to Harvard University. I knew immediately how she was ignorant about application process. I analyzed for her what kinds of students could make it and successfully convinced her." When realizing problems existing in parents' mindsets, Wang negotiated timely to prevent increasing misunderstandings or further conflicts. He acknowledged that his mother did not express control in an explicit form at that stage, but he anticipated that if no actions were taken, such over expectations would result in additional willingness to interfere with his applications.

Some others communicate with their parents when parental control becomes unbearable. As an example, Liu heard her parents encourage her to elect as the president of her school's student union for weeks. Initially, she ignored them, but her parents continued and spoke of the election more repeatedly. She became aware of the necessity of communications and, therefore, "talked to them seriously and told them that it's not something [she] liked."

Under some circumstances, adolescents are persuaded by their parents after negotiation. Gao, a female student finally decided to major in business management, recounted an earlier struggle about choice of major: "Years ago I wanted to study arts. My parents used examples of those without parents majoring in arts and pursued a career of arts. In these examples, they all

failed to realize their dreams. At first, I would argue with them, but they gave better responses in turn. For example, if I major in arts, it might become difficult to get a job or my basic values might be twisted. So I was persuaded." Gao does not think of her autonomy threatened in this case, since she reached an agreement with her parents. Even though the result does not match her initial stands, she still characterizes the negotiation as "effective" because she regards her parents' reasonings as trustworthy and persuasive.

### **5.2. Seeking alliance outside the family**

Serious household conflicts could contribute to adolescents' distrusts towards their parents. They regard their parents as not understanding their feelings and untrustworthy. In this regard, they might turn to their social network and trust dynamics outside the family to seek help.

Joanna, a female student, applying for the U.S. universities this year, indicated that her parents were relatively ignorant of her extracurricular activities and basic principles of college applications. Consequently, she requested her counselor's help more frequently: "I would like my counselor to make plans for me. I think she's reliable and her suggestions are always acceptable."

In other cases, adolescents perceive their parents' roles as stressful and therefore regard others as more reliable. For instance, Li was always bothered by her mother's frequent words to remind her of studying English more. She was not annoyed by the idea of studying English more, surprisingly: "I would like others to say that. Words from strangers, or anyone aside from my parents, are always encouragement after admirations. Studying English will become relaxing and I feel motivated." In this regard, "parents" are given a connotation that when they encourage adolescents to study, they are unsatisfied with their current status and imposing stress. On the contrary, people aside from parents are more inclined to judge adolescents positively and therefore are more welcome.

Liu, an adolescent devoting himself to public forum debate, expressed similar feelings: "My parents aren't really familiar with college applications. They know a lot about the process instead of my activities or some standards. I hope my classmates or teachers can say such words to me because they know the applications better. I don't really care who shows me such expectations. I want them to show me why they have such evaluations...The best expectation I've ever received is from my favorite debater. He got a national champion and he was great. One day I chatted with him, and he hoped me to get a champion in a national contest as well. I was touched because my favorite debater could say this earnestly. I was so happy that day." Compared with parents, peers, especially those excellent in debate, appear more

dependable because they share the same interests and experience with Liu. The common ground adds more values into their evaluations and Liu perceived those words as more valuable.

### **5.3. Performance**

To deal with their parents' expectations, Chinese adolescents might conform apparently but act against their parents' will after, behaving like a performance. Tang described such a narrative during the interview: "My parents expect me to go to sleep earlier every day. I always have something to do so I have to stay up late. Therefore, I always pretend to be asleep and then do my work secretly." In this case, Tang managed to act obediently but achieving her own purpose covertly.

Similarly, Gao shared her experience when handling a study plan designed by her mother: "My mom always says that I need to do something specifically aside from my homework every day. Sometimes she requires me to memorize 100 vocabularies but I can't. So I would agree at first and don't care whether I can complete that."

One major distinction between Tang's and Gao's performance is that their motivations differ. Tang pretended to behave obediently because her parents' expectations inhibited her from finishing her tasks on time, whereas Gao performed to create an illusion for her mother: Gao's mother would consider her expectations fulfilled and stop repeating them. Both cases illustrate that Chinese adolescents might conduct a performance when parents' expectations are against their sincere desires. However, conflicts in wishes are not the sole reason of performance.

Wang, a high school senior who self-reported as a medium-ranking student, narrated his behaviors after his entrance exam for secondary school: "After my entrance exam for secondary school, my dad asked me what scores I might be able to get. I knew my ability, but I still told him that I would score low, much lower than my actual estimations. I always try to make people around expect less towards me." To lower his father's expectations, he understated his scores in the exam. He was afraid of disappointing his parents and therefore gave a performance.

### **5.4. No response**

More than one-thirds of the interviewees recounted that they gave no response when parents imposed control, when they felt stressed by parental expectations, or during family conflicts. Previous literature might delineate such phenomenon as a manifestation of Chinese adolescents' conformity as the result of emphasizing authority in Chinese households. Through the interviews, however, the reasons for the absence of response vary

significantly. It is inappropriate, thus, to oversimplify the situation.

A few students did not respond to their parents and expected that they would stop talking on the same topic. For instance, Liu mentioned when describing the most major conflict last year: "My parents hope I could join in the Student Union, but I don't like such kind of speeches and competitions. So I only gave a perfunctory response." When parents impose their desire on adolescents, especially those unwelcome, students might not reply to bring the conversation to an end. Likewise, Tang shared about her personal experience: "They expected me to join an economics competition, form a club and socialize in Halloween party when I was a junior, but I wasn't interested. I didn't respond for a while, and they stopped mentioning it."

Other adolescents remarked that temporal silence could prevent further significant conflicts. Liu gave an account of his lesson: "Sometimes my parents say my classmates can be great in diverse aspects, so I have no reason not to work hard. Actually I always compare myself with others, but if they raise this point, it can only make me more stressful. Usually, I don't refute them. Firstly if they are comparing some facts, then it's undeniable. What is more, even if somebody seems great and fantastic, they will still have some obstacles and shortcomings, and that's normal. So refuting is unnecessary and will lead to more conflicts." Refuting and response are considered as one of the fundamental elements of quarrels. Therefore, adolescents might employ no response as a strategy to maintain a peaceful and harmonious household atmosphere. It is noteworthy, nonetheless, that such strategy does not necessitate obedience or conformity. Gao shared about her experience when considering her future prospects: "My mom always expect me to go to a college of high rankings, and therefore I could earn enough money to stay in the United States. I don't agree with her. I like to take a job I'm interested in, instead of one with satisfying wage. But I wouldn't refute her. At some time in the future, I will be capable of making my own choice instead of listening to her." In this instance, adolescents keep silent temporarily and wait until they can gain autonomy later. They avoid direct confrontations with their parents but are determined in their minds to act against their parents' wills.

In specific situations, adolescents cease the quarrels for a while to leave time for their parents to calm down. Sun expressed her attitudes that "during arguments, [she] would give up fighting temporarily: when all of [them] calm down and [she's] making a point, [her] parents certainly change their attitudes." Such behaviors are based on adolescents' confidence that their parents are reasonable and intelligent in a temperate mood. They believe that irritations or anger might prevent their parents

from dealing with conflicts sanely and therefore leave a time for both sides to be pacified.

Overall, adolescents display dynamic patterns of engaging with parental control and imposed stress. From active negotiation to the absence of response, their actions can hardly be dismissed as passive conformity. Rather, they reshape the power balance and negotiate their space of autonomy by strategically mobilizing their realms of knowledge and network resources available to them.

**6. DISCUSSION**

The study is valuable both for cultural studies in the realm of family and education and for understandings adolescents’ mindsets flip. Because of the surge of modernity and modernization, Chinese society has undergone noteworthy changes in recent years. The orientations of basic values widespread in society change so rapidly that it might result in an apparent cultural difference in small units like families. Modern Chinese parents grew up under the context of the transition from a planned economy and collectivistic cultures to a market-oriented economy, rising individualistic and liberal cultures. Students’ views of families form a sharp contrast with their parents as well: Chinese parents struggle in their mindsets about whether to conform to a harmonious atmosphere or allow their children to insist on their own beliefs for the pursuit of “truth.” Such a hybrid in families and parental experience is rare under other cultural contexts and is a fertile ground to be researched.

The research also refutes some mainstream but outdated opinions regarding Chinese adolescents: Chinese teenagers are described as obedient in families to avoid quarrels and disagreements in past literature [6, 16, 18]. The accounts from the interviews show that, on the contrary, Chinese teenagers possess a strong sense of agency and autonomy. It is crucial to update the views and attitudes towards Chinese adolescents to avoid cultural stereotypes. The study serves as a base to judge Chinese cultures and modern Chinese in a refreshed way.

Nevertheless, as the study results indicate, the study only explores the varieties of adolescents’ perceptions of parental control and their strategies to resolve the conflicts. However, the study does not identify the causes of diverse reactions and mindsets of adolescents when

facing problematic inner-family interactions. The study results can be a source for possibilities and variations among Chinese adolescents, rather than a foundation to form cause-effect relationships.

The individuals interviewed are a fairly homogeneous group in terms of class and parental education. Most of the individuals self-reported as middle class or upper-middle class, with most parents earning at least bachelor degrees. Parents’ education level is of considerable significance regarding inner-family interactions and conflicts since well-educated parents are commonly more calm and logical, with fewer intentions of violent behaviors. Parents of higher socioeconomic status stress more on rules and teenagers’ autonomy, are less directive and are more conversational than those of lower status [31].

The lack of variation in class and parental education can be attributed to the sampling method. The individuals chosen are majorly from the best high schools in Beijing. As the capital of China, the educational resources in Beijing are rich and more reachable compared to other less-developed areas. Students from the best high schools are usually highly competitive, even from the perspective of family background. Therefore, the study results are not evident to be comprehensive for under-developed areas in China. The results and reactions from the adolescents are heterogenous, but further studies might incorporate subjects from diverse hierarchies in various cities to explore whether more possibilities exist.

Additionally, the study only interviewed adolescents and recorded their perspectives and narrations, but is absent of accounts from parents. As a result, there are no comparisons between adolescents’ and adulthood’s perceptions. Researchers in the future might conduct interviews with both students and their parents. In this regard, researchers can draw a comparison between parents’ subjective evaluations of their control and children’s accounts on the same incidents. Misunderstandings in families might be recognized, and the causes are worth further efforts.



**Figure 1** Spectrum of adolescents’ strategies to resolve conflicts



**Table 1.** Classifications of control perceived by adolescents

	Direct parental control	Indirect parental control
Perceived by teenagers	Explicit control	Implicit control
Not perceived by teenagers	Can't observe / perceptions of absence of control	

## 7. CONCLUSION

Because of the rapid change in Chinese society and cultural values, the research explores current Chinese inner-family interactions and adolescents' strategies to resolve conflicts through peer-interviewing adolescents. The study investigates adolescent's differing perceptions of parental control and reactions to settle family disagreements.

From young adults' points of view, parental control can be categorized into three types: explicit control, implicit control, and absence of control. Explicit control occurs when teenagers sense stress imposed verbally and are forced to achieve goals because of their parents' desires. On the contrary, implicit control is not expressed directly by parents, but adolescents still feel the same effects. The interviewees also reported perceptions of the absence of control, largely attributable to parents' respect for children's autonomy or agreements achieved. Such perceptions, nevertheless, do not indicate absent of parental control objectively, since the study only interviewed adolescents; therefore, the results only show the subjective awareness of the young adults.

To resolve inner-family conflicts as a result of control or conflicts, Chinese adolescents develop a series of strategies. These strategies differ in adolescents' initiative to solve the problem. As Table 2 shows, these strategies are organized based on adolescents' attitudes from passive

to active. The most passive way recognized is having no response towards the conflicts. The disagreements are ignored to avoid further quarrels. Adolescents might adopt performance as well to lower their parents' expectations and prevent arguments. Trust dynamics outside the family is commonly sought so that young adults could gain additional emotional sustenance. The most active strategy employed by adolescents might be negotiations to achieve agreements with their parents.

The results drawn refute the simple stereotypes regarding Chinese adolescents. Because of the spread of collectivistic cultures and Confucian values, Chinese families are depicted as emphasizing conformity and a harmonious environment over individual thoughts and independence. The study shows that Chinese

adolescents' mindsets are far more complicated than the homogenized impression by having mixed perceptions of control from parents and strategies to resolve conflicts in households.

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